

FACT SHEETS

Scabies (from WebMD)

Topic Overview

Scabies is a very itchy skin condition caused by tiny mites that burrow into the outer layers of the skin. The barely visible scabies mites are attracted to the warmth and smell of a person and typically are spread through close contact with an affected person. Female mites burrow into the skin, creating small, threadlike tunnels that can sometimes be seen on the skin. The mites lay eggs and leave feces in these tunnels. It is also possible for scabies mites to spread to another person via shared personal belongings, such as towels and linens.

Scabies causes severe itching that is usually worse at night.

- It usually affects several family members at one time.
- The itching can be more severe in small children and older adults. Children tend to have the most severe skin reactions to scabies.

Contagious and incubation periods

- Scabies is contagious; mites can be spread to other people as long as a person remains infested and untreated, including during the period before symptoms appear.
- It takes 4 to 6 weeks from the time of initial infestation for scabies symptoms to develop (incubation period). People who become reinfested develop symptoms within a few days.

Symptoms

The most common scabies symptom is **severe itching** caused by an allergic reaction to the scabies mite and its feces. Itching may begin before any skin sores appear. It tends to be worse at night or after a hot shower. Some people have mild or no itching throughout the course of scabies infestation.

Young children are commonly affected:

- Between the fingers and on the palm side of the wrists.
- On the outside surfaces of the elbows and in the armpits.
- Around the waistline and navel.
- The scalp, neck, and face.
- The palms of the hands.
- The soles of the feet.

In most cases, scabies itching will persist for days to weeks after successful scabies treatment. This is due to an ongoing allergic reaction to the mite bites. The allergic reaction usually subsides over time once the mites have been killed. In addition to the person with scabies, anyone who has been in close physical contact with that person should also be treated. This may include several members of the same household, including anyone who has prolonged skin-to-skin contact (sleeping, bathing, or holding hands) with that person.^{[1](#),[3](#)}

What is scabies?

Scabies is an infestation of the skin with the microscopic mite *Sarcoptes scabiei*. Infestation is common, found worldwide, and affects people of all races and social classes. Scabies spreads rapidly under crowded conditions where there is frequent skin-to-skin contact between people, such as in hospitals, institutions, child-care facilities, and nursing homes.

What are the signs and symptoms of scabies infestation?

- Pimple-like irritations, burrows or rash of the skin, especially the webbing between the fingers; the skin folds on the wrist, elbow, or knee; the penis, the breast, or shoulder blades.
- Intense itching, especially at night and over most of the body.
- Sores on the body caused by scratching. These sores can sometimes become infected with bacteria.

How did I get scabies?

By direct, prolonged, skin-to-skin contact with a person already infested with scabies. Contact must be prolonged (a quick handshake or hug will usually not spread infestation). Infestation is easily spread to sexual partners and household members. Infestation may also occur by sharing clothing, towels, and bedding.

Who is at risk for severe infestation?

People with weakened immune systems and the elderly are at risk for a more severe form of scabies, called Norwegian or crusted scabies.

How long will mites live?

Once away from the human body, mites do not survive more than 48-72 hours. When living on a person, an adult female mite can live up to a month.

Did my pet spread scabies to me?

No. Pets become infested with a different kind of scabies mite. If your pet is infested with scabies, (also called mange) and they have close contact with you, the mite can get under your skin and cause itching and skin irritation. However, the mite dies in a couple of days and does not reproduce. The mites may cause you to itch for several days, but you do not need to be treated with special medication to kill the mites. Until your pet is successfully treated, mites can continue to burrow into your skin and cause you to have symptoms.

How soon after infestation will symptoms begin?

For a person who has never been infested with scabies, symptoms may take 4-6 weeks to begin. For a person who has had scabies, symptoms appear within several days. You do not become immune to an infestation.

How is scabies infestation diagnosed?

Diagnosis is most commonly made by looking at the burrows or rash. A skin scraping may be taken to look for mites, eggs, or mite fecal matter to confirm the diagnosis. If a skin scraping or biopsy is taken and returns negative, it is possible that you may still be infested. Typically, there are fewer than 10 mites on the entire body of an infested person; this makes it easy for an infestation to be missed.

Can scabies be treated?

Yes. Several lotions are available to treat scabies. Always follow the directions provided by your physician or the directions on the package insert. Apply lotion to a clean body from the neck down to the toes and left overnight (8 hours). After 8 hours, take a bath or shower to wash off the lotion. Put on clean clothes. All clothes, bedding, and towels used by the infested person 2 days before treatment should be washed in hot water; dry in a hot dryer. A second treatment of the body with the same lotion may be necessary 7-10 days later. Pregnant women and children are often treated with milder scabies medications.

Who should be treated for scabies?

Anyone who is diagnosed with scabies, as well as his or her sexual partners and persons who have close, prolonged contact to the infested person should also be treated. If your health care provider has instructed family members to be treated, everyone should receive treatment at the same time to prevent reinfestation.

How soon after treatment will I feel better?

Itching may continue for 2-3 weeks, and does not mean that you are still infested. Your health care provider may prescribe additional medication to relieve itching if it is severe. No new burrows or rashes should appear 24-48 hours after effective treatment.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. If you have any questions about the disease described above or think that you may have a parasitic infection, consult a health care provider.